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ABSTRACT

A trainer of teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Israel undertook a study of the use of classroom research to enhance the learning experience of her students, a multicultural group of 13 graduating trainees. The trainees were asked to conduct research on some problem in their own classroom teaching. They were given specific guidelines about how to proceed, and participated in group and individual discussions with the trainer. The students' chosen topics fell into two categories: problems specific to ESL teaching, and those related to the particular instructional situation. Students generally began their reflection at a practical level but eventually looked also at affective and other aspects of teaching. No relationship was found between trainees' sociocultural background and topics selected for research, but more experienced trainees approached the project somewhat more professionally. Two are used to illustrate the processes used and results achieved. It is concluded that: (1) the trainees' assignments became more practical and provided important information about their own teaching; (2) not every novice teacher was able to relate research findings to higher-level moral, ethical, and political issues; (3) these teachers are capable of this kind of research, but need careful guidance before and during the project. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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ACTION RESEARCH ON ACTION RESEARCH
A TEACHER TRAINER'S REFLECTIONS ON HER TRAINEES' ACTION RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

The problem of linking the practical teaching situation of novice teachers to the theory of a didactic seminar was examined by an EFL teacher trainer. The new teachers were asked to reflect on their teaching by doing action research as part of the course requirements in their last year of training. Action research was found to be a useful tool in the last phases of teacher education. However, careful preparation is needed, and the expressed level of reflection varies from teacher to teacher.

BACKGROUND

Reflective teaching is an essential trait to be developed not only in future or practicing teachers, but it should also be part of the teacher trainer's own teaching and development. The major goal of teacher training, as reflected in this paper, is to empower teachers with professional competence (Wallace, 1991) meaning that teachers are given tools to continue developing by creating their own practical theory described by Handal and Lauvas (1987) as a "person's private, integrated but everchanging system of knowledge, experience and values which is relevant to a teaching practice at any particular time (p.9)". It is, however, essential that the teacher trainers themselves are what Armaline and Hoover (1989) call transformative intellectuals who fit into the category of internally oriented practitioners (Korthagen and

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Wubbels, 1991);"teachers who want to use their knowledge and values to structure problems and experiences themselves"(p.5).

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this paper is to report on how action research is used as a tool by a teacher trainer to improve her own teaching of a didactic seminar. The aim of the study is to examine if, by having the graduating teachers carry out action research on their teaching, they will be capable of detecting problems in their work and finding ways to overcome the difficulties. This will hopefully help them in developing reflectivity similar to the ability described by Dewey already in 1933 as "a state of doubt and act of searching to find ways to resolve the doubt". The problem (or the doubt) is the individual teacher's problem, and "the decision making can flourish only under specific conditions", (Walters, 1989, p.18).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory presented builds on Handal and Lauvas'(1987, p.28) application of Lovlie's pyramid. Teachers' routine work is the action; transformation of knowledge and management of the class. This is, however, not sufficient for what is meant by good teaching which is linked to teachers' reflections on their teaching (Korthagen and Wubbels, 1991). The reflections need to be based on theoretical and practical information. The theoretical information comes from related literature, experts, etc, while the practical information is mainly rooted in their own experiences. In order to develop, which is the top level of the pyramid, teachers must apply the new information to develop as skilled teachers by becoming better technicians, and even more so as human beings by looking for moral, ethical and political justifications for their actions. (see appendix)

Teacher development is considered an ungoing process which never ends, and it comes about through teacher reflection which involves the relationship between thought and action, teacher and society (Barlett, 1990). Various models of the reflective process are presented in Korthagen's ALACT model 1988, McTaggert and Kemmis' mapping model, and the Lewinian experiental learning model presented by Kolb, 1984. The similarity in these models is that 1)they originate in action which is being reflected on, 2)alternative ways of action are being tried out 3)which again are being reflected on. It is an ongoing cycle, which nourishes teacher development.

Wallace (1991) has implemented the reflective cycle as part of his model called "Reflective Practice Model of Professional Educational Development" (p.49). However, he has included additional stages which are essential to the individual teacher's development. There is a pretraining stage which incoorporates conceptual schema trainees have about teaching before entering the training programme (Armaline and Hoover, 1989), (MacLeod and McIntyre, 1977), (Handal and Lauvas, 1987). During the training trainees receive theoretical knowledge about the subject matter and about teaching alongside their practical experiences in the classroom. The two types of knowledge, received and experiental, are used in their reflectivity which aims at accumulating in increased professional competence. The action researh reported on in the following makes use of all the stages of Wallace's model (see appendix).

THE STUDY

Action research was used in this study for various reasons. It is a natural extension of teaching experience and courseware to help students work with their individual teaching problems. The purpose of action research is to improve the novice teachers' own practice (Gore and Zeichner, 1991) and it is attractive to teachers mainly because it deals with their personal teaching experience. Furthermore, the research methods are less strict than in traditional research (Wallace, 1991), and even though it does require skills in data analysis

and analysis (Nunan, 1990), it is less frightening for the practioner than more conservative types of research.

The setting is Oranim School of Education which offers a four years training programme awarding a BA degree in English and a teacher certificate in English from elementary though highschool. The programme integrates subject matter, education, methods and practice teaching from the first year (see SOL programme presented by Korthagen and Wubbels, 1991). In the fourth year the trainees are employed by the Ministry of Education and Culture as English teachers for about twelve weekly hours. They come to Oranim two days a week, on which they take a didactic seminar and other courses related to the practical aspects of their training. They are visited by the trainer several times during the year, and the aim of these visits is to guide and help the teachers in their first year of teaching. The skill of self-assessment and reflection is encouraged throughout the training programme including during and after their practice teaching in the second and third year of training.

The study was carried out by the trainer of the didactic seminar of the novice teachers, who were asked to conduct action research on their own teaching. The students are multi cultural; Dutch, American, Israeli Arab (Muslem and Christian), Israeli Jewish, city and kibbutz. They teach in Muslem, Christian, Jewish city and kibbutz schools. It is therefore of utmost importance that the teachers are "permitted" to bring their own background and teaching situation into the action research. Generalization could not work in this setting due to the different conditions.

In previous years the final project of the trainees had been to research a specific issue in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The trainer and the new teachers had a feeling that this timeconsuming assignment was informative, but often disconnected from their own teaching situation. During the last academic year the trainer tried out her plan of action by asking the gradute teachers to find a problem in their own teaching and to try to do something about it. They

were given careful guidelines about how to go about the project (see appendix), and even though it was an individual study, there were "caring and sharing" sessions, reports and discussions involving the whole group. The teachers met individually with the trainer whenever they felt the need for it.

The outcome was presented in a seminar paper (40-50 pages), containing a summary of their initial journals, readings, plan of action, journals written during the implementation period, conclusions, and evaluation.

The trainer's reflections on her course lead to the teachers' action research. A diary about her work with the course was kept during the implementation period and the findings are presented in this paper.

FINDINGS

In the following the main findings of the trainer's action research are presented. General information about the teachers' studies is followed by a more careful description of some of the studies conducted by the teachers.

The group consisted of 13 teachers; two of which were experienced teachers who took the course to freshen up their teaching, which is already evidence of reflection; they felt they wanted to change and improve their teaching. The other eleven were first year teachers who were still in the pre-service training programme, but they had full responsibility for the teaching of English in three classes. There were one male and twelve female teachers.

The problematic area the teachers detected and chose to work on in the action research may be divided into two main groups; problems of EFL teaching and problems more related to their specific teaching situation. Most teachers started their reflections at a rather technical level, however, in most cases it became apparent that in addition to looking for practical solutions, other aspects of teaching, such as the learners' feelings and how their work would influence the learners in the future were also brought up. Issues related to what the school and the authorities can do to improve the

situation were discussed in the conclusions. Not every teacher reached the same level of reflection, some were mainly occupied with what kind of activities to bring into the class to improve their teaching. This kind of reflection is, however, according to Zeichner (1983) highly valued, not as an end in itself, but as a means for bringing about desired ends. Experience and more confidence will hopefully raise their level of reflectivity. It is interesting to notice that these are the teachers who asked for a minimum number of meetings with the trainer. They were also late in completeing their papers and handing them in. The teachers who reflected at all three levels as defined by van Manen(1977); 1.technical rationality, 2.practical action and 3.critical reflection (concerns itself with moral and ethical criteria and values) asked for weekly meetings with the trainer. They used the tutorial to inform the trainer about their projects and to discuss possible solutions more than wanting to be told what to do. The papers of the more exited group of teachers were completed before the due date.

No relation was found between the socio/cultural background of the teachers and their level of reflections, neither was there any age difference. The more experienced teachers approached the research in a more professional way; one of them conducted a traditional experimental research on reading strategies while the second tried out a new reading programme she had developed for beginning readers. The first was rather theoretical in her approach and implementation of the findings, while the second was more practical and based most of the study on her own experience. The novice teachers used an approach integrating theory and practice which was more in line with the given instructions.

The two cases described below are chosen because, in spite of the many differences, they both relect the action research carried out by the group.

Case 1

I.Female, age 24, Christian Arab, taught enrichment courses organized by the Municipality to 11th and 12 th grade Beduin

students. The aim of the course was to help them prepare for the Matriculation Exam after school hours.

The teacher started her diary entries by listing the main difficulties she felt the pupils had reaching the conclusion that the main problem was reading comprehension. Her problem was to find the best way to deal with the pupils, difficulties, and she wrote:

"I feel that I am the doctor who is supposed to give the right medicine to the patients in order to help. However, my problem is that I do not know what medicine to give. I have so many. Kari helped me out of this mass after she observed one of my classes. She asked why I pretaught all the new words in the reading passage. This opened my eyes, and I realized that I did not do anything to improve my pupils' reading strategies. I had to learn more about reading strategies and try to teach them".

Based on this reflection the teacher decided that she wanted to work on one specific reading strategy; developing the pupils' vocabulary awareness. Her next step was to learn about vocabulary awareness. She read literature related to the topic, she talked to several trainers and also to experts on applied linguistics. She collected information about the present state of her pupils by the help of a questionnaire. So she used theoretical and practical information and applied it to her specific teaching situation.

Her next step was to work out a plan of action. It carefully described how she wanted to work with her class on vocabulary awareness. Step 1: The pupils do not have to understand every word in order to comprehend. Step 2. Many words can be guessed from its context. Step 3.Parts of a word might provide clues for its meaning. Step 4. The dictionary should be used only if there is no other way out. The teacher worked out activities which incorporated the chosen steps.
She gave her pupils a pretest measuring their level of reading comprehension before she started working according to her plan of action. She worked according to her plan for four weekly hours for two months, and then she gave them a posttest.

During the implementation stage her diary says;

"I tried to put myself in the pupils' place, being sensitive to their problems with this specific passage. I also realized that it became boring to do the same activities again and again, so I changed some of them. I learned that I had to be consistent about what I am doing".

The teacher is here showing evidence of ongoing reflections about her work, and she is flexible enough to change her activities whenever she feels the need for it as long as it does not interfere with the overall plan.

The results of her posttest showed that all the pupils had improved in general reading comprehension. She analysed the results of the various subparts of her tests which provided her with important information about the value of her activities.

Her own conclusions were given at the technical level; she had learned more about how to deal with reading comprehension. At the second level, affective level, she reported that she had moved from hopelessness to realizing she was able to help her pupils, and that the tension during the lessons was reduced ; the class became much more relaxed. At the third level relating to moral and ethical values she wrote: "I have learned that no matter how weak pupils are, it is always possible to teach them something, even though the progress may be slow". She concludes her paper by saying:

"I feel I learned tremendously from this project, but all that I learned only makes me eager to try out other ways of teaching and to continue learning".

It seems that this teacher has become competent of releflective teaching, and that the action research she had to do in her last year of training has empowered her with the will and the tools to develop independently in the future.

Case 2

Male, age 40, Dutch origin, kibbutz member, teaching junior highschool classes in a kibbutz regional school. He studied for three years in a teacher's seminar in Holland before he started the four years academic programme at Oranim.

This teacher presented his action research at the end-of year conference at Oranim and his own outline provides a clear illustration of the project:

ACTION RESEARCH

PRACTICAL	THEORETICAL
teaching	
diary	literature
colleagues	(mainly the theory
trainer	of R. Feuerstein)
friends	
self criticism	

PLAN OF ACTION (not tried out)

The diary entries of this teacher show an interesting development.

"The paper's original subject was to be "Use of the Target Language (English) in Classroom Situations (by the teacher), and I started recording my lessons. Apparently, my increased awareness was enough to do away with most of my Hebrew during the lessons. The need for writing a seminar paper on a problem that no longer existed seemed superfluous. On the other hand, I realized I had a great problem teaching weak learners. This subject may seem less original, or down trodden, yet it poses an authentic, noisy and life-size problem".

The teacher approached the problem by first of all listing the problems the weak learners had with his lessons, and then he started to reflect what he might have done to cause these problems. He realized that he did not know enough about how weak learners learn, and that he prepared material which was far beoynd their level. Neither did he reveal a sufficient level of confidence, and this caused several discipline problems.

"My teaching has been based on simplifying material, anxiously trying not to make it too childish. The pupils' behaviour moved between two extremes: noisy and very active as opposed to "dead" and apathetic. I am transmitting lack of

confidence, and I must do something about it".

The teacher was very thorough in learning about weak learners and how to work with them. He collected information from colleagues, from the trainer, from the pupils and most of all from himself. In addition he read a lot, from the learning strategies of the good EFL learners and what can be used with weak learners, to general problems of weak learners, and to Feurerstein's (1980) theory about Instrumental Enrichment. His plan of action is a combination of practical and theoretical issues that reflect various levels of reflections. Some of his points are :

Technical

-be lenient with mistakes

-use a book to provide confidence

-have a variety of activities

Affective

-accept pupils' emotions

-reduce tension

-don't lose your temper

Values

-delegate responsibility

-start believing in students' ability to be modified

-avoid surrendering to a defeatist attitude -

be self-critical

-don't blame the students before checking yourself

-all students must have equal opportunities

Even though the "plan of action was not carried out by the teacher this year, he has reflected and learned about a problem related to his own specific teaching situation:

"This project has put the issue of teaching weak learners in a comprehensive framework. Somehow I will have to extract from all the theoretical solutions the right formula that will integrate the three components for success: planning, trust and management. Writing this paper has been the ultimate contextualised learning experience, in which I have masochistically served as my own guinea-pig".

This teacher has not yet worked through the whole cycle of

reflective teaching, but his paper reflects a very good beginning. The actual implementation of his plan might be more problematic than learning about the subject, due to his theoretical approach to problem solving. However, he has become aware of the practical aspects of teaching weak learners, and by integrating theory and practice, he will hopefully have more success with this type of learners in the future.

The two cases of action research described above reflect two different teacher types in two very different teaching situations. They have not carried out similar types of action research neither have they reached an equal level of development. However, they have both diagnosed problems in their own teaching through reflections, learned about the problem and looked for solutions. They seem to be working in the direction of positive teacher developmemt which was the main goal for the trainer's personal plan of action.

CONCLUSIONS

Some important conclusions can be drawn from this teacher trainer's action research on her didactic seminar given to novice teachers who also did action research on their own teaching.

1.The teachers' assignments became more practical and provided important information about their own teaching, about the teaching of EFL in general, and about the development of EFL teachers. This is still a field which has not been sufficiently researched (Lange, 1990), and more action theory has to be developed by teacher trainers.

2. Not every novice teacher was able to relate the findings to higher level issues of moral, ethical and political character (van Manen, 1977), but all of them were able to define and reflect on one or several problems of their own teaching. The question is if with experience they will achieve a higher level of reflections. This calls for a longtitudinal study on this specific group of teachers.

3.The study indicates that novice teachers are capable of reflections and of conducting action research, but there is

need for careful preparation before and during the research work (Gore and Zeichner, 1991). It cannot be expected that all new teachers achieve the same level of reflection. Further research is necessary in order to learn more about what influences the teacher's ability to develop and what role the training plays in teacher reflection and development.

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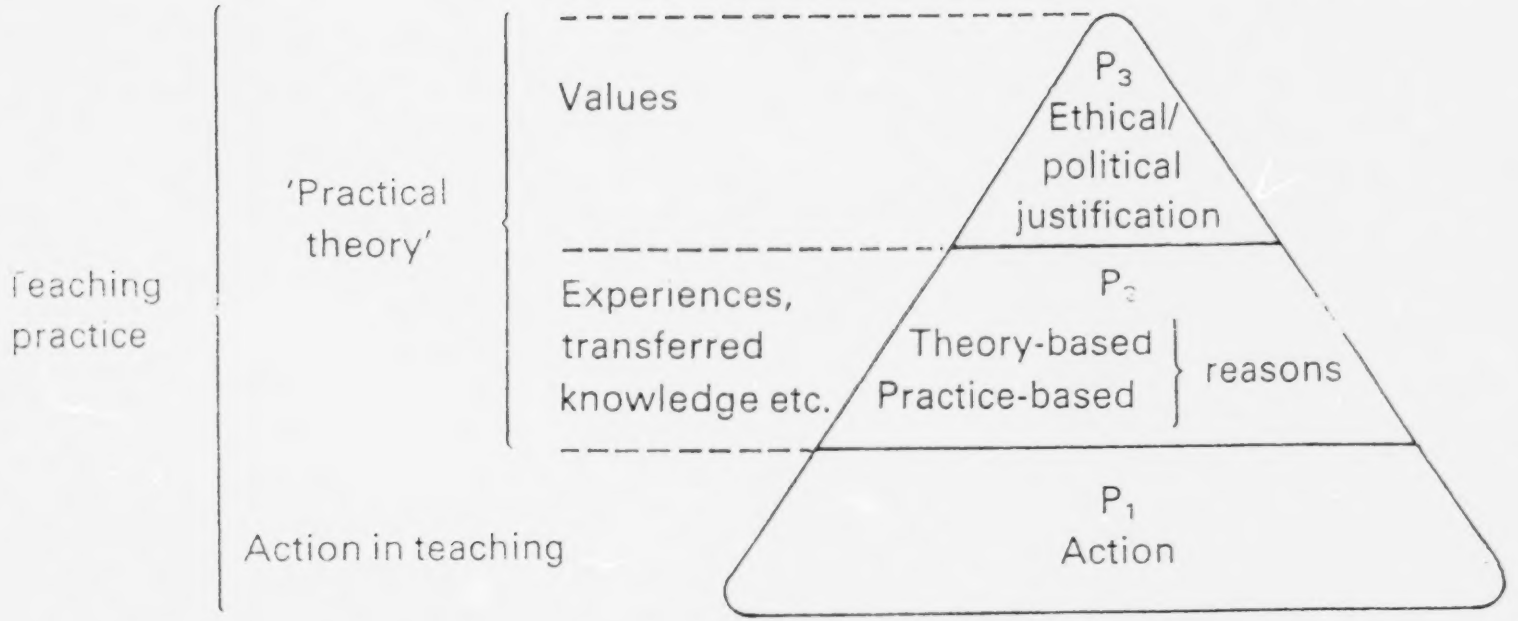

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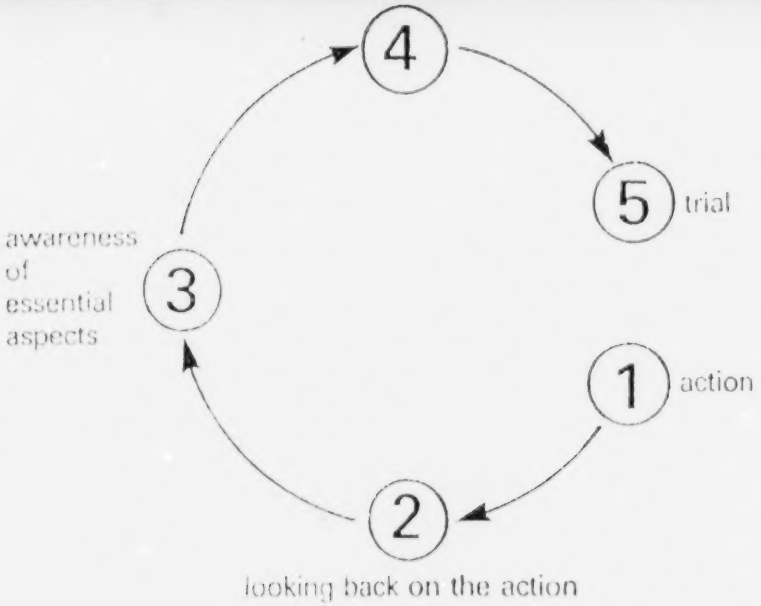
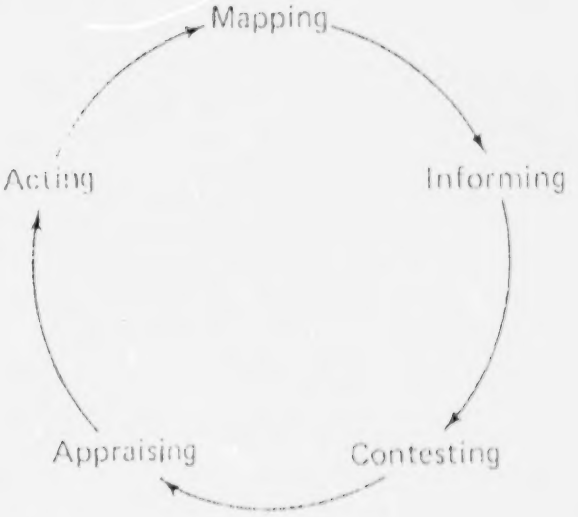


Korthagen, 1988



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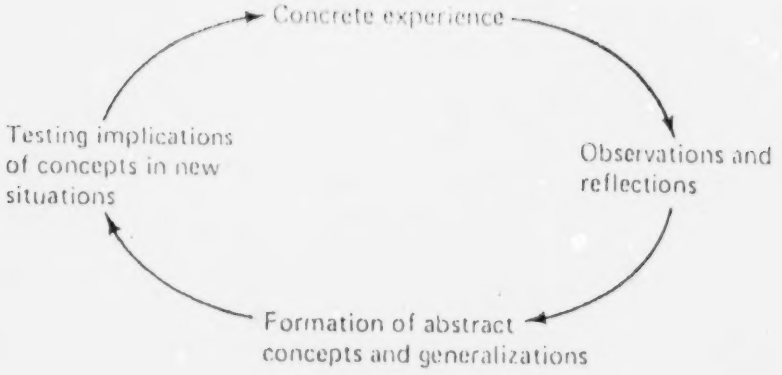

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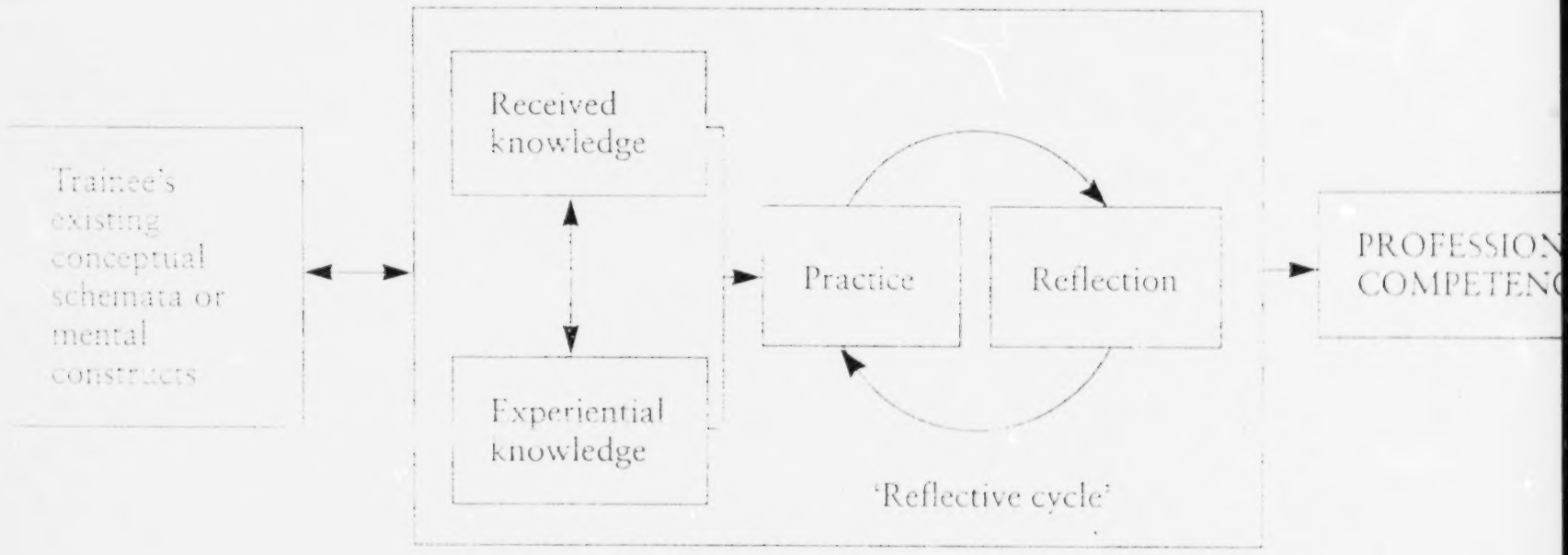

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